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Whatever the topic of your research project, the first place to visit in your search for material is your local library.

THE LIBRARY When one walks into a modern library, one finds more there than simply books on shelves, there is a world of books on topics and subjects to suit everyone's tastes and needs. The local library is a treasure trove of source material and the items contained here are the research tools. Books, journals, magazines together make up the work that has already been carried out on your topic. It is important to find out what has been written on your topic - the precise books you require are probably out there. The next step is to be able to read them. How will you find them? Every library is laid out differently, but there are a number of things that each has in common.

THE LAYOUT OF THE LIBRARY The library is divided into a lending section and a reference section. You may be able to borrow some books for your project, but those books that are general reference books and those that are out of print or are part of a specialised collection are held in the reference section.

SPECIALISED COLLECTIONS:

THE LOCAL STUDIES COLLECTION This is the section of the library where you will find all the books and journals about your locality. You will also find books by local people on these shelves.

HISTORICAL NEWSPAPERS AND MAPS COLLECTION All Public Libraries hold some original maps and newspapers from the 1700s to the present day. Most of the local newspapers are preserved on microfilm. Microfilm is a miniature copy of a document on a reel of film. The microfilm reader machine allows you to enlarge and photocopy from this reel of film.

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THE BOOK SHELVING SYSTEM The most common layout system used in libraries is called Dewey Decimal Classification. This classification and shelving system is used in almost every library you will ever visit, whether that may be a college library in Africa or America or a public library in Ireland. Books are shelved in a numerical sequence from 000 to 999. Each book is assigned a number that corresponds with the subject it deals with. This number can be seen on the spine of the book. The books are shelved in numerical order. Hence all the books which deal with Irish History for the period 1900-1921 will be shelved together at 941.50821. It may never be important that you know this information but it is good to know the numbers for the areas that you frequently visit – History – Fine Arts or Literature. You may always ask a librarian but there are occasions when you may have to look for yourself.

It is still a complicated system but remember that the general classification number for history is 900. I love to browse as I find my way to the 900s on the library shelves, I pick up books at random and by doing this I find all sorts of treasures.

THE CATALOGUE The library has a system which helps you make your way through the library. This is the catalogue, which lists all the books in the library under subject, author or title. When I started to use the library the catalogue was a bureau consisting of long drawers with cards in them. These are still in use in some libraries. Most libraries have a modern computerised system that allows you to search for books in a number of ways including subject, author or title, but also by the Dewey Decimal Number and ISBN (the barcode of a book). You also have the option of finding books on related topics and other books by the same author.

What if the book you are looking for isn't there? Or the topic you want to cover is so obscure that the books in the library are not relevant? The answer is:

INTER-LIBRARY LOAN The inter-library loan system allows you to request any book that has been published. So immediately the search has spread to the millions of books in print. Copyright Libraries such as the British Library and Trinity College Dublin are legally bound to house a copy of every book published in the UK and Ireland. It is not surprising that many of Trinity College's books have to be requested from what are called 'The Stacks' - you can just imagine the thousands and thousands of books that line the shelves of the storehouses.

THE INTERNET The Internet is an excellent source of research, but like any source it must be used correctly and wisely. You must question the content. Use 'official' web sites if possible. Enthusiasts who write web pages are not always accurate, they write directly to web pages with no editors checking or evaluating their material. There are museums, libraries, societies and institutions whose web pages are as thoroughly researched as any academic tome. The Internet is best used if it is a stepping stone to locate more material. Institutions and libraries are now on line. You can contact them with your queries and locate what is available to the researcher. You can access the catalogue of Trinity College library from your local library. The web address is <http://www.tcd.ie/Library> and the British Library is <http://portico.bl.uk>. The British Library holdings collected over the last 250 years are in excess of 150 million separate items. The Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) has 12 million records. The US Library of Congress <http://www.loc.gov> has 110 million items that are housed on 500 miles of shelves. A listing of Irish Library & Museum Sites can be found on the National Information Server Web Site <http://www.heanet.ie>

BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARIES When writing a biography the temptation is to try to read every available piece of information ever written. If the people were the subject of numerous biographers and were prolific themselves it can be daunting. After reading all of this material there may reams of notes and extensive references. The outcome for some scholars is that they lose

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momentum before the task is complete. It is not always necessary to read a full account of a person's life. By doing this, it can be hard to find and summarise all the main points. Why not go to a biographical dictionary to find the main events of the life story. Do your **R**esearch from known facts and from there you can shape your own version of the story with ease.

ENCYCLOPAEDIC REFERENCES Locate encyclopaedic references to key events, places or people, then go and flesh out the story from that point. An Encyclopaedia is useful if you are dealing with events rather than people. Check if there is a bibliography at the end of the entry, which would point you in the direction of other material.

DIRECTORIES There are directories for towns and counties, which give information on individuals, businesses and the locality - what it was like, the population and its amenities at the time that the book was published. If your research topic is local, a directory is a good place to find references to buildings and businesses that may not be featured elsewhere.

INDEXES Indexes are a short cut to seeing where there may be articles of interest in newspapers, journals and magazines. There is nothing worse than trawling through journals, newspapers or magazines only to find that there was already a source that would have given the volume and page numbers for the piece you wanted. Indexes are available to some newspapers. *The Times* (London) has indexes but these are rarely related to individuals, unless they were the landed gentry or somebody involved in a scandal or an event such as a murder or an event of political importance. These are chance finds; if you are dealing with bankruptcy or divorce, there often can be interesting stories included and quite unexpected information.

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